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It's really Project Gobbledegook

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WASHINGTON — It is possible, although not likely that someone who speaks English could explain "Project Democracy," Ronald Reagan's murky and expensive scheme for promoting the "infrastructure of democracy" around the world.

But the first language of Charles Z. Wick, director of the U.S. Information Agency, who would run it, is gobbledegook. The foggy, foggy dew of his prose about what "PD" is and isn't has left the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as confused and suspicious as when he began.

"I should like to apologize for any ambiguities that have been introduced here," he said after several particularly befuddling passages about "coordinating the information and sensitivities ... to implement various communications and approaches to assist the infrastructure of the legal, business and religious communities."

The members were friendly to Wick, who is a person of obvious good will and good nature, but school was out when he wheeled out some huge organizational charts that Sen. Chris Dodd [D., Conn.] said "made Rube Goldberg look like a computer chip." They were supposed to lay to rest widespread fears that the \$65 million budgeted for the program will be used for the promotion of what Sen. Paul Tsongas [D., Mass.] labeled "Project Right-Wing Democracy."

One chart headed "National Security Decision Directive on Public Diplomacy" seemed particularly ominous. It showed an "International Political Committee," which sounded as if its chairman would be Yuri Andropov — against whom the whole effort is directed.

"In God's name," said the usually long-suffering chairman, Charles H. Percy [R., Ill.], "who is really in charge?"

"Frankly," said Wick with becoming humility, "there is a lot of confusion in the government ... Perhaps I should not have brought those charts with me." He insisted the charts had nothing to do with Project Democracy.

Dodd pointed out that right under "International Political Committee," in the lower left-hand corner, "Project Democracy" appeared.

Wick said, "You will have to forgive me, I didn't know you were listening so carefully."

"I wasn't," said Dodd. "I was looking."

Wick obligingly referred thereafter to the charts as "Rube Goldberg maps." He also said he didn't think some of the projects should be funded "in the way I

Mary McGrory

have seen," and of one that it would "illustrate and flesh out what the symbolism is."

Tsongas took Wick on a tour of the minefields he must tread. He asked if the Central Intelligence Agency is "still involved" in the program. Wick assured him that "they will never be involved" — and then volunteered that CIA Director William V. Casey had sat in on early discussions "because he has a very important job to do, just as you and your colleagues in Congress do."

Tsongas also asked about a USIA grant of \$190,000 to Ernest Lefever, the hard-right conservative who was Reagan's doomed choice as director of our human rights policy. Wick said that rejecting Lefever would have been "reverse McCarthyism." He nonetheless, on reading about it in the paper, asked the General Accounting Office to investigate. He hopes the probe will "evolve into nothing more than a dispute about judgment."

"I don't believe," Wick added, although nobody had suggested that it was, "that there is anything illegal in that."

Sen. Nancy Kassebaum [R., Kan.] said that a trip to Africa had convinced her that the natives need health care and basic education more than the English lessons Project Democracy will offer.

Sen. Charles McC. Mathias [R., Md.] said the best way to sell democracy is to bring foreign students here and "turn them loose" to see for themselves. Project Democracy, in its attempt to achieve acceptance, is co-opting proven programs like the spectacularly successful Fulbright Scholarships, which have yielded the matchless political dividend of a number of highly placed alumni who are now running their countries.

Wick agreed with the senators about the importance of educational exchanges. The father of the Fulbrights, former Sen. William Fulbright, was invited to the stand. In totally intelligible terms, he warned that foreign governments now contributing to the program will cut their donations if it becomes part of the U.S. propaganda campaign.

Wick declined Percy's offer of a shredder for his charts. But Project Democracy, unless someone can explain it better, seems headed in that direction.

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